**‘In the margins is where I breathe’: Queering the Double in Marie Nimier’s Works**

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In an oft-quoted interview with Jeanne Sarah de Larquier dating from 2004, Marie Nimier confesses to a fascination with liminality, foundational to her own being and which she subsequently transfers onto her writing: ‘Je suis née de cette marginalité, c'est-à-dire que je ne me suis jamais sentie à l'aise au centre. […] Dans la marge, on respire. II y a de la place. Et de là, on a sans doute une perception plus aigüe du centre’ (347). On the French literary scene, Nimier occupies a peculiar position. Rather than be caught up in the ‘courants littéraires’, she has imposed herself as one of the most eclectic writers, not only through the hybrid character of her work, but through a constant repositioning of her textual universe which destabilizes and challenges fixed perceptions. Her works resist and reject essentialism be it normative or affirmatively non-normative, drawing instead the portrait of a world in flux: ‘je n’aime pas décrire les choses comme étant une, ni les personnages comme étant tout droits. Je pense qu’on est plutôt dans une dynamique’ (in Schwerdtner 2015: 53). Her *oeuvre* is imbued with a ludic sense and she manifests a penchant for linguistic acrobatics, the double entendres and homonyms are at home in her writing. Fixity is exchanged with fluidity and the co-habitation of seemingly contradictory terms carve out a new space which seeks to escape a much abhorred normative core. Words, sentences, narratives and identities are part of a larger strategy which seeks to destabilize a fixed centre.

Most recently, it was her male posturings which have been the source of scandalous response, her 2013 novel entitled in a declamatory or even inflammatory manner *Je suis un homme*, narrated in the first person masculine, attracted the ire of the (male) literary establishment. In the following paper, I will direct my attention towards an insidious yet resonant de-centering mechanism. Same sex desire is an aspect which has received little attention in the field of academic inquiry surrounding Marie Nimier’s writings, a fact which surprises the author herself as she declared in a private interview, especially given the recurrent insertion and precision of such episodes. I seek to explore the ‘ex-centric’ qualities of her work, to borrow Linda Hutcheon’s term, through the figure of the double which I read through a queer lens. I will investigate the aporetic tournure and dynamics at play within the construction of characters, following Nimier who admits ‘qu’il y a sans doute quelque chose de constitutif de mon travail—et qui m’intéresse— dans cette façon de reconnaître qu’on est à la fois une chose et une autre’ (in Schwerdtner 2015: 53). The psychoanalytical and postmodern legacy together with the advent of autofiction have dispensed with notions of a stable, coherent self, displacing and blurring boundaries, therefore allowing for different modalities of transformation and extension. I propose that the elusive location of the queer subject provides a pertinent vantage point from which to navigate and interrogate contemporary notions of subjectivity.

A genealogy of same-sex desire which I trace back to *Domino* is taking shape within Nimier’s *oeuvre*. This is the first text where it became apparent to me, oblivious as I was to the fact that it followed actual chronological order – *Domino* was published in 1998. Part detective story, love story and a writer’s story, the novel abounds in tales of the scandalous with overt references to incest and prostitution. Among this amalgam of “perversions”, one deviance almost escapes unobserved, the slight shift into the territory of same sex desire. The eponymous character, playfully named Domino (short for Dominique), encounters her lover’s friend in whose house they had embarked upon their sexual encounters:

Elle se présenta, Kristen Shift, et s’avança pour me serrer la main. J’aimais bien sa voix, son accent, la façon dont elle relevait ses cheveux […] Le tissu léger glissait, découvrant ses jambes. […] Elle me proposa de la suivre dans la cuisine. Tout était beau en elle, voluptueux. […] Je frissonnais. J’avais envie que cette histoire de cabas ne finisse jamais, j’avais envie de me greffer dans la vie de Kristen, oui, je voulais être son greffon. (45)

Enter Kristen Shift, who with her English-sounding name is introduced as other, the female other which fleetingly attracts the protagonist’s sexual attention. Her surname indicates the shifting nature of sexual attraction, the *glissement* present in articulations of desire *chez* Nimier, thus sketching the double which will become Aline in *La Nouvelle pornographie* and Frederika in *Photo-Photo*, works to which I devote particular attention in this paper.

The double has nonetheless been present in her work from the first novel *Sirène*, which introduced us to the hybrid figure of the mermaid, central to Nimier’s writing. With the figure of the *sirène*, the splitting and doubling is located within the self, hinting at an internal schism, an intrinsic identity tension. As her *plume* becomes more assured, Nimier dares to project the self into exteriority through characters that mirror a series of anxieties, most poignantly sexual, creating a space where the conundrums which plague the characters to be exposed and worked through. In *La Nouvelle Pornographie*, Nimier *se met en scène* and proposes a spellbinding chain of associations between Marie Nimier author and character which through complex layering seeks to bring closer and distance itself from the real life referent. The self is further extended into to figure of Aline onto whom Nimier transfers the ‘burden’ of ‘la nouvelle pornographie’. Whilst the Nimier character is pondering the significance of the term and trying to produce it according to the guidelines provided by her editor, it is Aline who seems to embody it. In *Photo-Photo*, however, the double is not merely alluded to, but is firmly set up through the character of Frederika, her *sosie*.

The female double is born out of a particular set of cultural and textual circumstances. Morello and Rodgers note : ‘Il est clair que la psychanalyse, le postmodernisme et toutes les formes de deconstruction ont marqué cette generation: beaucoup de sujets mis en scene sont dedoublés, eclatés, mal définis’ [gagnés par la folie, en danger de se perdre] (2002: 28). The figure of the double seems to be particularly germane to discussions of autofictional selves. I propose that by extending the self into the figure of the double, Nimier captures and distills Isabelle Grell’s view of autofiction who argues ‘que la réalité de l’auteur est engagée dans un processus de dévoilement d’un monde précis, où la vérité est ancrée dans le dépassement de soi vers l’autre et témoigne d’un être-dans-le-monde dans sa fragmentation [...] et son rapport aux autres’(2014: 106).

But of course our author further complicates such developments and additionally infuses the text, *La Nouvelle pornographie,* with a distinct postfeminist character. Through the two female figures, the eponymous Marie Nimier (whom I will refer to as Marie to avoid confusion) and the character of Aline, Nimier places at the center a post-feminist subject and its dual facets. Thus, two stances of post-feminist legacy oppose each other through the female figures: Aline, a liberated young woman who fully embraces her sexuality and Marie Nimier, torn and attempting to reconcile her emotional side with her sexuality in the wake of a harsh feminism which relinquished traditional feminine attributes as signs of weakness. Nimier stages the fragility and the restlessness of the contemporary female subject, the product of a feminism which has not quite succeeded nor quite failed. As Best and Crowley note, ‘far from attempting a resolution of this complexity, Nimier’s text portrays the complexity itself as an accurate account of postmodern sexuality for women’ (2007: 36). Marie is stuck in the *clivage* between the entrapment of traditional female gender roles and the liberated, sexually insouciant woman. Nimier astutely stages the state of confusion of the contemporary woman, who would like to embrace sexuality, but who is not yet ready to give up on her romantic projects either: ‘Il fallait toujours que je m'invente une histoire d'amour. Même dans les situations les plus scabreuses, je trouvais un alibi romantique’ (43). The differences between Marie and Aline are referred to on the same page, as she follows on to describe her friend : ‘Elle avait besoin d’amour gratuit, sans contribution sentimentale’ (43). Earlier in the text, Aline’s predispositions are signalled: ‘Aline ne sait rien refuser’ (19). Marie has difficulties moulding ‘new pornographies’ and abandoning her own dreams and desires: ‘Aline me connaissait bien. Elle savait que mon fantasme le plus tenace n’était pas de violer un sapeur-pompier, avec ou sans casque, mais, comme toutes les fillettes nourries aux contes de fées, de me marier, d’être heureuse, et, par conséquent, d’avoir beaucoup d’enfants’ (45). It is love which Marie reads as transgressive: ‘Aimer, voilà l'audace’ (165). Her roommate however is an explorer of the porousness of borders, a shifter in her own right: ‘Aline avait appris à être souple, elle passait d’un univers à l’autre sans problème apparent […] elle était incapable de choisir, elle ne pouvait que glisser’ (36). Cathy Wardle argues that ‘Nimier’s writing posits an otherness which is radically unsettling, hard to pin down, impossible to define, as rather than merely reversing the hierarchy of binary oppositions, she shifts the foundations upon which binary difference stands, celebrating the pleasures of the ambigious and the indecidable’ (275).

Her editor Gabriel Tournon remarks upon Marie’s predilection for displacing established categories: ‘Vous êtes diabolique, avait-il dit avec un large sourire, vous ne laissez jamais les choses exactement où elles sont, il faut toujours que vous affûtiez un détail qui déplace les certitudes’ (98). Already from the first page, in a passage which discusses the narrator’s and Aline’s sleeping arrangements and spatialiazation of intimacy, possible means of engaging with the text are suggested to the reader. We are therefore warned that: ‘la pompe en l’occurrence n’étant/était pas à chercher dans ce qui se voyait, mais dans ce qui était caché’ (11).

It is worth mentioning at this point that *La Nouvelle pornographie* was published in the midst of a particular turn in women’s writing, a time where sexuality was taking the helm – and arguably still is. Shirley Jordan advises that ‘French women writers’ intensive focus on sex is one of the most striking features of the literary world in the 1990s and beyond’ (2004: 54). The motivations of a lay reader picking up a book entitled *La Nouvelle pornographie* might not be hard to guess, but the novel eskews such categorisations. Neither explosive nor implosive, *La Nouvelle pornographie* proves to be quietly subversiveby taking a different *tournure*.

Our protagonist Marie engages in acts of precarious balance on the dividing line between fully affirmed heterosexuality and homosexuality, inscribing a distinct queer dimension to her sexual and emotional cartography. The first chapter plunges the reader into the narrator’s imagination and creative ambitions, as we are privy to a domestic sexual fantasy involving a ‘table à repasser’, Marie’s first attempt at a *nouvelle pornographique*. The passage which ends the first chapter, however betrays the narrator’s attraction to her roommate, Aline:

Ses gestes étaient lents, chargés de rêves. Une certaine mollesse dans la lèvre inférieure, une moue, une nonchalance laissaient à penser qu’elle avait envie de faire l’amour. Elle dormait avec un vieux T-shirt de mon frère. Je me sentais vide et sale. Lorsqu’elle se dressa sur la pointe des pieds pour prendre les tasses, je vis sa touffe noire se dessiner en transparence. Elle tenait le bas du T-shirt coincé entre les jambes, et c’était douloureux, ce tissu prêt à lâcher – j’avais tellement besoin de tendresse. (24)

Hiding under the veil of fictionality – as part of an intricate scenario involving Tom *le pompier* which is supposedly yet another *nouvelle*, Marie gives textual flesh to her desire for Aline and describes explicitly:

Aline plongea sa main entre mes cuisses, par-derrière, et, avec l’habileté d’un prestidigitateur, y fit disparaitre ses doigts. Son index me caressait, le gras de son index qui jouait avec mon clitoris. […] Je soupirai. La peau d’Aline était douce et chaude, j’aimais son odeur moelleuse, sa précision. (86)

Such ‘jailissements’ of same sex desire puncture the text. Earlier on in the first chapter, as she is caught up in the creative process, navigating the corridors of memory and fiction, thoughts of other women intrude upon the various sexual scenarios she is fictitiously attempting to devise. Thinking back to her school days as a possible source of inspiration, she remembers her classmate Solange:

Parfois Solange – disons qu’elle s’appelait Solange – portait son index à sa bouche. Elle constituait un réservoir de salive tout près de sa lèvre inférieure, ainsi n’était-elle pas obligée d’enfoncer le doigt. J’avais honte de la regarder, d’ailleurs je ne la regardais pas: je la voyais. Je m’asseyais en biais, appuyé contre le mur, dédoublant, oui je dédoublais. (14)

Although the hesitations of her desire are linguistically marked, the powerful ‘pulsion scopique’ betrays itself in ways language cannot obstruct. Marie further confers powerful attributes to such desire, as she seems to be suggesting that not only does the double is that on whom one projects same sex desire, but that same sex desire itself can cause doubling. Best and Crowley note the processual flux at work: ‘the erotic subjectivity displayed by the narrator is […] unstable, uncertain and represented as engaged in a perpetual process of becoming’ (2007: 36).

The ‘dénouement’ of the novel does not offer a well-defined resolution, but further knots, *noue* the strands of subjectivity. Just as there were different points of entry into the text - as confusing as they were through the multiplication of layers of fictionality - and suggested ways of reading, the final scene of the novel too offers different points of exit, either heteronormative or with queer overtures. In a tale of reversal which contradicts classical narratives of traditional male doublings, it is not the double which annihilates the self but the subject itself which assimilates it. An onomastic exchange takes place following Marie’s sudden malaise. This final scene is a manifestation of ‘ce trouble du double qui vous surprend, du double qui vous pénètre sans demander l’autorisation’ (91). When prompted for her name by the *pompier* (who else ?), Marie declares that she is called … Aline.

Il me demanda mon nom et je compris que je m’étais trompée de personnage, dès le début de l’histoire, une erreur d’aiguillage, facile à corriger avec les moyens modernes, une erreur de distribution. […] On me demandait encore comment je m’appelais en surveillant ma tension. Des mots sortirent de ma bouche, je les répétais pour m’en convaincre. Oui, Aline, j’ai bien entendu, nota le pompier assis sur le côté, mais votre nom de famille. Le brouillard se dissipa. La première fois que j’ai vu un sexe de femme, je l’ai trouvé très sombre. (181)

One could of course read this as a metamorphosis which would transform Marie into the source of interest of Gabriel’s romantic and sexual attention but I propose that the nuances of the passage allow for a non-normative reading. Through a coupling which is signalled onomastically, Marie finally effaces the border betweem the two characters – of subjectivity and of repressed desire. The double does not outperform, but allows the subject to perform itself. Wardle suggests that ‘In her final words then, it could be argued that Marie is finally facing up to her transgressive desire, recognising the attraction of an otherness which does not rely upon gender as the primary marker of difference’ (2004: 282). The reference to the ‘sexe de femme’ further strengthens such a reading and its phrasing, its undecidability gestures towards futurity: whether or not Marie has changed her opinion produces an opening in meaning which is coherent with queer practices.

However optimistically I would like to read such signs, I must however now turn my attention to *Photo-Photo*, for although a tense sexual *fil rouge* runs through *La Nouvelle pornographie*, it is in this later novelthat Nimier gives free rein to the sexual energy contained in the figure of the double, as it culminates in a sexual *rencontre* between the narrator and her *sosie*. Same-sex interest thus reaches full expression in *Photo-Photo* in absence of the male (possible) romantic interest but guided by the spectral figure of Karl Lagerfeld:

Il me semblait plutôt que c’était Karl qui m’avait ouvert la porte, Karl qui détenait les clés. (*Photo-Photo*, 13)

Vous savez que vous avez un sosie? me demanda-t-il d’un air mystérieux. Une femme extraordinaire, une amie. Elle s’appelle Frederika, c’est beau Frederika, ça vous irait comme un gant. Elle travaille aux Thermes de Caracalla, à Baden-Baden. (*Photo-Photo*, 34)

The sexual charge affixed to the climax of the novel is alluded to through an accumulation of sexual references to her former partner Stephen which appear as the narrator takes the first concrete steps to diminishing the spatial distance between her and her *sosie* Frederika. Shortly after she arrives in Baden-Baden, the first explicit reference to her lover and their relationship is made: ‘[…] et voilà que Stephen occupait de nouveau mes pensées, Stephen et son sexe dressé, tellement appétissant’ (*Photo-Photo* 143). Nonetheless, sexual remembrance does not act as a deterrent, Stephen unlike Gabriel Tournon, does not intervene and derail the sexual *rencontre*.

In *Photo-Photo,* thedouble is constructed through a textual game of ‘connect the dots’ and it is through and in the text that the double surfaces. Their actual encounter only happens towards the end and is very briefly described (see pg. 203-204). In contrast with *La Nouvelle pornographie*,the double is not simply alluded to but is set up as *doppelgänger*, a sosie in the figure of Frederika. The doubling is intricately embroidered at a linguistic and narrative level. Through various elements which are paired or mirrored, the portrait of the *sosie* emerges:

Quand tu mets en scène tous ces éléments qui marchent par deux (paire de chaussures, paire de lunettes, Otto et Toto, les jumelles, jusqu’au *n* manquant de la mention *Personel*, sur l’enveloppe d’Huguette Malo), j’ai l’impression de voir se dessiner le portrait de cette femme, cette Allemande qui anime un atelier de dessin pour les enfants, celle qui te ressemble tant. (*Photo-Photo*, 124)

If polarity is more marked in *La Nouvelle pornographie* – the text as discussed opposes a hesitant Marie Nimier and an exuberantly sexual Aline – particular attention is given to the details which constitute the double. A sense of uncanniness troubles perception: ’II y avait trop de differénces, ou trop de similitudes, pour ne pas se sentir mal à I'aise’ (72)**.**

A particular ‘flou’ which plays with notions of similarity and difference persists in Nimier’s writing. I would like now to focus on an episode which is key to understanding the author’s position on gender and extensively on desire. When the narrator visits Frederika in Baden-Baden, she brings with her a very special memento, a drawing she had made when she was 8-years old and which gave birth to controversy among her school-age peers. Asked to draw a *bonhomme* by the school teacher, the young narrator produces a drawing of a little girl.

Pour le moment, tu es la seule. Et tel que c’est parti…

Quand elle affichera les autres propositions, je comprendrai ce qu’elle a voulu dire. Tous les personnages ont une pipe ou un chapeau, une moustache, un marteau, une cravate pour évoquer cette chose un peu mystérieuse qui pend entre leurs jambes et que l’on ne voit pas, ah non, il y a des limites, et j’ai envie de crier : mais allez-y, les amis, allez, dessinez la queue, les poils et le reste, qu’est-ce qui vous en empêche puisque vous tenez tellement à ce que votre bonhomme soit un homme, déguisé en homme et qui joue à l’homme ? Qu’est-ce qu’il a de drôle, mon dessin ? Qu’est-ce qu’il a de risible ? Car tous rient maintenant qu’il est exposé dans la classe, ils rient parce que c’est une fille, et qu’une fille parmi tous ces messieurs, c’est rigolo, voilà. (*Photo-Photo*, 143)

Issues of female representation and projections of self are astutely staged in this scene, which challenges the idea of man as standard referent, neutral *repère* through the figure of the ‘bonhomme’. Self-representation seems to take on obscene qualities, though one cannot but wonder what reaction would an anatomically correct drawing of a bonhomme have ellicited? Toril Moi remarks: ‘The pleasure of self-representation, of her desire for the same, is denied woman: she is cut off from any kind of pleasure that might be specific to her’ (2002: 133). The situation is nonetheless paradoxical for the narrator is othered by offering a representation as a projection of her female self. She is thus berated for daring to perform her own gender in a specular relationship and thus opposing the norm. Through a transgression of linguistic and figurative categories ‘the invisible normativity of heterosexual culture’ (Berlant and Warner 1995: 347) is revealed; the discursives gestures of power are revealed through acts of resistance. The girl is compelled to cite the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subect, a norm which through its implicit sanction others her in a hierarchical binary:

J’explique qu’il y a des bonshommes masculins et des bonshommes féminins, cela va de soi, non ? Pour la fillette de huit ans que je suis, admettons que j’ai huit ans, ça va de soi, mais le problème est ailleurs. […]. Ce qui fait de la peine, c’est le décalage. L’incomprèhension. L’aveuglement. (144)

As a child, de Medeiros notes, the narrator ‘does not spontaneously ‘think’ through gender’ (2013: 202). This initial intuition however remains valid throughout Nimier’s works as her desire is marked by an attraction that is not driven by and remains unencumbered by gender. The magnetic undertones exerted by women precede the age of adult sexuality, the narrator noting her reaction to her controversial drawing of a little girl ‘Je suis fière de moi, de mon travail. Décidément, cette petite fille me plaît. Ou plus exactement, elle m’attire’ (*Photo-Photo*, 130). The seed for same sex-desire is thus planted through the desire for self-representation, if we are to view the drawing as a figurative double.

Nonetheless, the double is never well defined; it populates the ‘monde aux frontières flottantes’ (138) which the narrator herself inhabits:

Pas de crâne pour enraciner les cheveux […] le contour de la tête est absent.

Tout flotte. Tout est suspendu. En équilibre précaire. […] Ce que je n’ai pas oublié, c’est l’instant où j’ai décidé de ne pas tracer la ligne qui aurait du entourer le visage de mon personnage. Je ne l’ai pas tracée car soudain il m’est apparu qu’elle était inutile. Et non seulement cette ligne ne servait à rien, mais elle était fausse. (*Photo-Photo* 141-142)

Nimier plays with the dividing line, persistently effacing borders within and between subjectivity. The ‘rencontres’ with the doubles display the material practices of such erasures: ‘Frederika gomme, mes jambes, mes épaules, mes bras, […]. Elle m’efface, frotte encore, comme si elle voulait entrer en moi’ (*Photo-Photo* 174). This passage strikes a resonant chord with readers of *La Nouvelle pornographie –* this is a scene between Marie and Aline : ‘Je ne sais pas ce qui nous arrivait, ce qu’elle voulait effacer en se frottant contre mon corps, comme si j’étais une gomme’ (NV, 115).

Nimier extends the self into the figure of the double through a dissolution of borders, staging the displacement that is at the core of self-identity: ‘Pour moi, ça pouvait se formuler ainsi : comment ressembler à quelqu’un qui vous ressemble quand on ne se ressemble pas soi-même ?’ (170) the narrator of *Photo-Photo* asks. Tales of incoherence haunt the notion of subjectivity itself; contemporary literature, Jordan remarks, has dispensed with the idea of finding yourself as a legacy of Postmodern thought which has rendered the idea of recovering a lost (pre-existent) self-redundant (2004: 19). The encounter between self and ‘other’, the double, represents manifestation of a contemporary concept of self, based on the mode of interrogation and quest, with fluid and porous borders, coherent with queer practices. By populating her *univers romanesque* with a number of doubles and intimations of extended selves, Nimier eschews stable identity politics in favour of a self ‘aux marges flottantes’. In the margins of the text, where meanings and identities confound each other, is where Nimier and her characters can breathe.

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